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ABSTRACT

Studies of motivation as a factor in learning success imply that, in second language learning, low self-expectancy for success leads to a low level of motivation no matter how attractive foreign language programs might be. The belief that there is no causal connection between his or her own behavior and learning success prevents the learner from expending necessary effort. If it is discovered that high aptitude for foreign language learning coincides at times with low motivation, research should be carried out to determine if low self-expectancy is a factor in this combination. Affirmative results from such research would point to further studies to determine the various bases for low self-expectancy; these might include sex, quality and amount of previous experience, and vicarious experience. (JB)

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EXPECTANCIES FOR SUCCESS OR FAILURE: A ROLE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING?

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Researchers attempting to explain differences in foreign language learning achievement have usually invoked, singly or in combination, four factors: method, age, aptitude, and attitude. Spolsky (1969) discusses each of the factors in turn. He says that the importance of age as a factor in accounting for variance is widely recognized. New and better methods for teaching second languages are ever being developed; so far, no one has emerged as patently superior. The identification of foreign language learning aptitudes has progressed through prediction of achievement by general verbal aptitude to more successful prediction by specific abilities (e.g. phonetic coding) thought to be directly relevant to second language acquisition. Nevertheless, although Carroll and Pimsleur both report some high correlations between aptitude scores and achievement in their work, in general the correlations between aptitude test scores and foreign language learning success have been low.

The fourth factor cited by Spolsky is attitude. He says that in the typical language learning situation, the attitudes of a number of persons (the learner, his parents and peers, the teacher, and speakers of the language) can influence the learner's motivation to acquire the language, and thus, presumably, his eventual achievement. Spolsky cites work by Carroll, Shuy, Gardner and Lambert and others as investigations illustrative of the role of attitude in second language acquisition.

What I want to suggest is that there is another category of attitudes that should be considered in accounting for variance in achievement. That category is the attitude of the learner toward himself -- his beliefs about his own abilities and about the possible causal connection between effort on his part and language learning success. I want to suggest that the learner's expectancies for success or failure may influence his second language learning achievement, and to suggest some strategies for investigating those expectancies.

A large share of the work on expectancies comes out of the Social Learning Theory tradition of cognitive psychology. Cognitive psychologists emphasize the role of the individual's perceptions and beliefs in influencing his behavior. Expectancies are the individual's subjective estimates about the probability that in a given situation, a certain act will be causally related to a desired state of affairs. They could be called estimates about the contingencies of reinforcement. Two related kinds of expectancies are relevant for foreign language learning. The first is the individual's belief about whether the source of reinforcement is internal or external to him -- Rotter's Locus of Control (Rotter 1966). The second is the individual's subjective estimate of

his probability of succeeding at a given task -- his confidence level.

In an elaboration of the theory of expectancies, Attribution Theorists (Weiner, 1974) suggest that in addition to holding differing perceptions of the source of reinforcement in general, individuals differ on whether they will attribute a given outcome (success or failure) to ability, effort, task difficulty or luck. Ability and effort are considered internal factors, but effort is classified as variable and ability as stable. Task difficulty is external and stable, while luck is external and unstable.

There is evidence to suggest that different expectancies for success or failure are associated with differences in outcomes for achievement-related tasks. Work in a laboratory setting by Tyler (1958) and by Feather and his associates (1966, 1967, 1968) indicates that induced expectancies for success were associated with high levels of achievement and expectancies for failure with lower levels of achievement. In a classroom setting, Crandall, Katkovsky and Preston (1962) found that children's self-reported expectancies for success or failure made significant contributions to predicting achievement.

What are the implications for foreign language learning? To answer that, let's first contrast the view of motivation usually associated with L2 acquisition research with a view which incorporates the notion of expectancies.

The typical definition of motivation found implicitly or explicitly in second language learning equates the concept with an interest in or desire to do something, in this case to reach foreign language proficiency. The Language Aptitude Battery (Pimsleur 1962) assesses motivation with an index of interest in studying a foreign language. The work of Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguishes two types of motivation, the desire to learn a second language for intrinsic reasons or the desire to learn it for pragmatic purposes. A corollary to this view of motivation would reason that since the desire for an object or state or being is a function of its attractiveness or desirability, increasing the attractiveness of foreign language study should increase motivation, effort expended, and finally achievement. Our journals abound with suggestions for increasing program attractiveness as a way to increase achievement.

The second view of motivation suggests why increasing the attractiveness of foreign language proficiency may not be enough. The Expectancy Value theories of motivation (Weiner, Op.cit.) associated in part with Social Learning Theory, equate motivation with the total force or drive impelling an individual to act (Battlis and Waters, 1972). These theories specify that motivation or force is a function not only of the attractiveness of a goal object (such as foreign language proficiency) but also of the individual's expectancy that the behavior in question will yield the goal object. Further, they

specify that attractiveness or incentive value and expectancies combine multiplicatively such that if either variable has a value near or equal to zero, the resulting motivation will be low or non-existent.

Research by Seligman (1975) and others with animals and humans has demonstrated that if an individual's expectancy for success is very low because he has learned that effort and outcome are not causally related, he will not perform a behavior required to obtain a desired reward or escape an aversive situation. The subjects who perceive no causal connection between their behavior and reward and so cannot perform are said to be "learned helpless." In a related study Dweck and Reppucci (1973) found that following failure a certain group of children would not perform a required response even though the incentive value of the goal was high and they were capable of the response. The children who gave up in the face of failure tended to attribute responsibility for failure to forces outside themselves, and in situations where they did acknowlege responsibility for outcomes tended to blame lack of ability rather than lack of effort for their failure.

The implications of all this for second language acquisition seem to be the following:

If the learner's expectancy for success at foreign language learning is low, then his level of motivation will remain low no matter how attractive our foreign language programs become. If he believes that there is no causal connection between his efforts and foreign language proficiency, then he will not expend that effort. If he believes that foreign language success or failure is a function of factors outside his control -- external factors such as luck or task difficulty or internal factors that he cannot change, such as ability, then he will not expend effort. He will be "learned helpless" with respect to foreign language learning. We ask then, are there potential foreign language learners who possess the requisite aptitude for success but whose low expectancy for success will keep them helpless? If so, can we expect to find a certain constellation of traits which characterizes these learners?

Those questions can be answered only by empirical test. I would like to sketch out a proposed strategy for attempting to begin to answer them.

First we must find out whether aptitudes for foreign language learning and expectancies for success in this area do indeed vary independently, i.e. whether individuals of high or normal aptitude and low expectancy for success exist. Previous research has indicated that aptitudes and expectancies need not be highly correlated. A study by Todd, Terrell and Frank (1962) found both high and low expectancies among subjects of superior ability. A correlational study which administered the LAB to assess both language aptitude variables and the desire to learn a foreign language, and an expectancy measure to assess

both the learner's estimate of his probable success and his attribution for probable outcomes would seem to be a logical first step.

If we were to find that among the subjects of high or normal aptitude, there existed both individuals with high and low expectancies for success, then our task would be to tease out the variables which contributed to these differential probability estimates.

What factors might we investigate as possibly correlated with normal aptitude and low expectancy? I would tentatively suggest three variables that might provide a place to begin the investigation.

The first is sex. Research by Crandall (1969) indicates that grade school girls have a lower expectancy of success than do boys, evey in circumstances where they possess higher measured ability. And Todd, Tyrell, and Frank have found that among high aptitude college students, women tended to have lower expectancies for success and to blame lack of ability rather than lack of effort for their failures.

The second is quality and amount of previous experience. Work by Feather (1967) indicates that the amount of previous success or failure can influence both future expectancies and future performance. Failure experiences at the study of one foreign language might well lead to low expectancies for a second.

The third is what might be called vicarious experience. Personal conversations with classroom teachers have suggested that low expectancies for success are often created from the memory of an older sibling's unhappy encounter with foreign language study.

These factors may not turn out to be the critical ones, but they provide a place to start.

In conclusion then, the notion of expectancies and their relation to achievement is not a new one. But the concept is not one which has received much attention in the literature on foreign language learning, and it may be profitably applied to the task of teasing out the factors which determine differences in success at second language acquisition.

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